

Hearing and Heeding Christ's Aboriginal Vicar: Following a Well-Formed Conscience to Christian Maturity

Introduction

1. Conscience in the news
 - a. Health Care bill. Conscience protection for health care workers.
 - b. Recent article in first things about whether Hitler had a conscience. Whether the terrorists on 9/11 could be said to have done a morally good deed, because they were following their conscience. These articles point to confusion about conscience.
 - c. Legislators who claim they're following their conscience. Letter from a close relative of a famous politician around the first anniversary of his death castigating me for writing an editorial around his death describing how, in addition to much good, he also did much evil, especially with regard to the defense of the unborn and the scandalous following of him by many other politicians. He said the Senator was exercising freedom of conscience. Would that exonerate him?
 - d. In Catholic circles, recent beatification of Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, who distinguished himself in the 19th century by writing so persuasively about the meaning of conscience and for following his own even into suffering.
 - e. So many breaking commandments without any sense really that anything is awry. At least in the olden days, if people missed Mass, were shacking up out of wedlock, were putting material goods above spiritual goods, not welcoming strangers, outright disobeying teachings of the Church like against contraception of IVF, if they were divorcing-and-remarrying or marrying outside the Church, they would basically be doing it against their conscience. Now few seem to realize.
2. These all point to the relevance of tonight's talk, which is entitled: "Hearing and Heeding Christ's Aboriginal Vicar: Following a Well-Formed Conscience to Christian Maturity."
 - a. The expression "aboriginal vicar" comes from Cardinal Newman from his Letter to the Duke of Norfolk. He called the conscience the "aboriginal vicar of Christ," meaning that the conscience is the vicarious voice of God that human beings can perceive even before they become aware of the definitive revelation that Christ came from heaven to earth to give us. Because it is the vicar of Christ, it has a power. In terms of our conscience, we're not called to remain aboriginal; our conscience is meant to be educated just like savages are hopefully eventually civilized; but even before that practice of education, we know certain things are wrong, like intentionally hurting or torturing other people.
 - b. We're called to hear and heed the voice of conscience. Our maturity as moral agents in general as well as Christians in particular depends on forming our consciences to hear Christ's voice and then freely following that voice.
3. Fr. George has asked me to concentrate in particular on the formation of conscience, and I will. But I think because so many people are confused about what conscience really is, I think it would be good for us, relatively briefly, to discuss the conscience, what it is, how it functions appropriately. I think it would also be wise to tackle explicitly some false notions of conscience that remain prevalent. It's only when we grasp both of those that I think the points about the proper formation of conscience can be given.

What Conscience Is

1. Definition of Conscience

- a. There are several definitions of conscience, some more descriptive, some more precise and scholastic. The Second Vatican Council took it up in *Gaudium et Spes*, saying many things that can provide a good overview for us:
 - i. GS 16: "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law that he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems that arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience that by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.
- b. So we first see that conscience is the "voice of God" speaking to man, written in his heart.
 - i. CCC 1777: When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.
 - ii. VS 57. The text of the Letter to the Romans which has helped us to grasp the essence of the natural law also indicates "the biblical understanding of conscience," especially "in its specific connection with the law:" "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law unto themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them" (Rom 2:14-15).
- c. It's not just a law but the voice of a lawgiver, giving direction as to do something or avoid something else.
 - i. VS 58. The importance of this interior "dialogue of man with himself" can never be adequately appreciated. But it is also a "dialogue of man with God," the author of the law, the primordial image and final end of man. Saint Bonaventure teaches that "conscience is like God's herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God's authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force".[103] ... Conscience is "the witness of God himself;" whose voice and judgment penetrate the depths of man's soul, calling him "fortiter et suaviter" to obedience. "Moral conscience does not close man within an insurmountable and impenetrable solitude, but opens him to the call, to the voice of God. In this, and not in anything else, lies the entire mystery and the dignity of the moral conscience: in being the place, the sacred place where God speaks to man".[104]
 - ii. To be faithful to right conscience is to be faithful to God and to himself.
- d. It's not arbitrary, either subjectively or objectively, but bound to the truth.
 - i. CCC 1777: It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments.
 - ii. VS 59. The precise nature of conscience ... is a "moral judgment about man and his actions," a judgment either of acquittal or of condemnation, according as human acts are in conformity or not with the law of God written on the heart.
- e. It can be either "right" or "erroneous."

- f. To obey conscience is the “very dignity of man.” Our character depends not only on our listening to and following our conscience, but making sure that we have tuned in to the voice of God in a world in which there are many counterfeit voices.
 - i. CCC 1780 The dignity of the human person implies and requires uprightness of moral conscience
 - ii. Popular wisdom often equates the value of man with his conscience: “that man has no conscience” or “he has a perverted conscience.”
2. Fuller definition: The Catechism goes on to give us a more precise definition.
 - a. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1778 Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed.
 - b. CCC 1780: Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed. The truth about the moral good, stated in the law of reason, is recognized practically and concretely by the prudent judgment of conscience. We call that man prudent who chooses in conformity with this judgment.
 - i. Cardinal Ratzinger suggests in a 1991 speech that synderesis should be replaced by anamnesis, because we have a memory of the good and the true ontologically. From his origin, man’s being resonates with some things and clashes with others. This anamnesis is not a store of retrievable contents, but an innate capacity to recall what is in accord with what man’s nature seeks. We don’t have arguments to prove it’s there, but it just is there. Ratzinger prefers this recalling.
 - c. Veritatis Splendor 59. The judgment of conscience is a "practical judgment," a judgment that makes known what man must do or not do, or which assesses an act already performed by him. It is a judgment that applies to a concrete situation the rational conviction that one must love and do good and avoid evil. This first principle of practical reason is part of the natural law; indeed it constitutes the very foundation of the natural law, inasmuch as it expresses that primordial insight about good and evil, that reflection of God's creative wisdom which, like an imperishable spark ("scintilla animae"), shines in the heart of every man. But whereas the natural law discloses the objective and universal demands of the moral good, conscience is the application of the law to a particular case; this application of the law thus becomes an inner dictate for the individual, a summons to do what is good in this particular situation. Conscience thus formulates "moral obligation" in the light of the natural law: it is the obligation to do what the individual, through the workings of his conscience, "knows" to be a good he is called to do "here and now." The universality of the law and its obligation are acknowledged, not suppressed, once reason has established the law's application in concrete present circumstances. The judgment of conscience states "in an ultimate way" whether a certain particular kind of behaviour is in conformity with the law; it formulates the proximate norm of the morality of a voluntary act, "applying the objective law to a particular case".[105]
3. Personal Responsibility
 - a. We are stewards.
 - i. CCC 1781 Conscience enables one to assume responsibility for the acts performed. If man commits evil, the just judgment of conscience can remain within him as the witness to the universal truth of the good, at the same time as the evil of his particular choice. The verdict of the judgment of conscience remains a pledge of hope and mercy. In attesting to the fault committed, it calls to mind the forgiveness that must be asked, the good that must still be practiced, and the virtue that must be constantly cultivated with the grace of God.
 - b. We cannot morally be forced to act against our conscience.

- i. CCC 1782 Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. "He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters." (Dignitate Humanae)
- 4. Doubtful circumstances
 - a. Fr. Wojciech Giertych, OP¹: Traditional moral theology worked out several principles to aid the conscience in doubtful cases.
 - i. The first was that in doubt, you're free (in dubio, libertas). When there's a doubt, use your brains. This is when there's true doubt, not questioning about the justification. There may be doubts about whether the law applies. Doubt doesn't apply if there is a question as to what reasoning led to the conclusion, there is no doubt. There's no doubt about contraception, because the teaching is clear, even though some don't see the argumentation.
 - ii. The second was that in doubt the condition of him who possesses is better.
 - iii. The third is that no one is required to do impossible things.
 - iv. The fourth is the obligations and punishments are to be interpreted strictly, whereas privileges widely.
 - v. These rules were worked out in the times of casuistry to help people not to fall into fear neuroses.
- 5. Summary
 - a. Some scholars have said that there are three levels to conscience:
 - i. The first level is the practical judgment terminating a process of moral deliberation. It points to one's personal and reasoned judgment that a particular course of action is right and morally permissible or wrong and morally excluded. GS 16 says this, "do this, shun that." This implies a reflective moral judgment, not feelings or a mysterious non-rational agency. This is a judgment or act of the intellect, not a subjective feeling. Concern for the truth is essential. (We call this the *particular moral conscience*.)
 - ii. The second level is a general knowledge of right and wrong, good and bad, of basic moral principles and truths. Awareness of the law of God written in the human heart. St. Thomas Aquinas calls this *synderesis*, or the habitual awareness of the first principles of practical reasoning and of morality. (We call this the *general moral conscience*.)
 - iii. The third level is a special mode of self-awareness, in which we are "alone with God." This is both "consciousness" and "conscience." It is not just a disclosure but a call, a summons, to that full humanity of which we already have some idea. Most often we think of conscience as "doing something" but in this third sense, it is a command to be something. We are aware of ourselves as moral beings, summoned to be ourselves in accordance with our dignity as free and intelligent beings (DH 2). We are not yet the beings God calls us to be, and we're capable of becoming by shaping our lives to him and his truth. At this level, conscience is the dynamic thrust within us to transcend ourselves to moral truth. It is often called the *transcendental conscience*.
 - b. All three levels are inherently related. We are aware of our calling and order our actions toward that calling in conformity with what we know is good.

Erroneous judgment

- 1. We'll just assume the necessity for the formation of conscience for now (which we'll discuss later) and bring up an erroneous conscience.

¹ Class Notes taken by me, 1996, Angelicum, Fundamental Moral Theology

2. CCC 1790 A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.
 - a. Veritatis Splendor 62. Paul's admonition urges us to be watchful, warning us that in the judgments of our conscience the possibility of error is always present. Conscience is "not an infallible judge;" it can make mistakes.
3. CCC 1791 This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility. This is the case when a man "takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin." In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits.
 - a. VS 63. Conscience, as the ultimate concrete judgment, compromises its dignity when it is "culpably erroneous," that is to say, "when man shows little concern for seeking what is true and good, and conscience gradually becomes almost blind from being accustomed to sin." Jesus alludes to the danger of the conscience being deformed when he warns: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Mt 6:22-23).
 - b. St. Bonaventure said that conscience is the herald of God. The herald would have a trumpet in the city squares and give his message. He would sound and announce the law of the sovereign. The herald speaks in the name of the king and speaks with the authority of the king. Conscience speaks in the name of God. But the herald has to be tuned in to the king. The conscience has to be formed to apply the principles of morality to particular acts. To summarize, conscience is the voice of God and has God's authority. It must always be obeyed, but we have to be concerned that our herald, our conscience, is tuned into the message of the king.
4. CCC 1792 Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct.
5. CCC 1793 If - on the contrary - the ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience.
6. VS 62: Conscience, as the judgment of an act, is not exempt from the possibility of error. As the Council puts it, "not infrequently conscience can be mistaken as a result of invincible ignorance, although it does not on that account forfeit its dignity; but this cannot be said when a man shows little concern for seeking what is true and good, and conscience gradually becomes almost blind from being accustomed to sin." In these brief words the Council sums up the doctrine which the Church down the centuries has developed with regard to the "erroneous conscience."
7. Conscience always obliges in the name of God. Even the case of invincible erroneous conscience does not give an exception: conscience in this case desires evil because it judges it to be a good and hopes to fulfill God's will.

Modern confusions and problems with regard to conscience

1. Relativism
 - a. VS 32: Certain currents of modern thought have gone so far as to "exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values". This is the direction taken by doctrines that have lost the sense of the transcendent which are explicitly atheist. The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment that hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil. To the affirmation that one has a duty to follow one's conscience is unduly added the affirmation that one's moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience. But in this way the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity

and "being at peace with oneself", so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivistic conception of moral judgment. As is immediately evident, "the crisis of truth" is not unconnected with this development. Once the idea of a universal truth about the good, knowable by human reason, is lost, inevitably the notion of conscience also changes. Conscience is no longer considered in its primordial reality as an act of a person's intelligence, the function of which is to apply the universal knowledge of the good in a specific situation and thus to express a judgment about the right conduct to be chosen here and now. Instead, there is a tendency to grant to the individual conscience the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly. Such an outlook is quite congenial to an individualist ethic, wherein each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others. Taken to its extreme consequences, this individualism leads to a denial of the very idea of human nature. These different notions are at the origin of currents of thought that posit a radical opposition between moral law and conscience, and between nature and freedom.

- b. VS 60. The judgment of conscience does not establish the law; rather it bears witness to the authority of the natural law and of the practical reason with reference to the supreme good, whose attractiveness the human person perceives and whose commandments he accepts. "Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil. Rather there is profoundly imprinted upon it a principle of obedience vis-a-vis the objective norm which establishes and conditions the correspondence of its decisions with the commands and prohibitions which are at the basis of human behavior."
- c. VS 64. It follows that the authority of the Church, when she pronounces on moral questions, in no way undermines the freedom of conscience of Christians. This is so not only because freedom of conscience is never freedom "from" the truth but always and only freedom "in" the truth, but also because the Magisterium does not bring to the Christian conscience truths which are extraneous to it; rather it brings to light the truths which it ought already to possess, developing them from the starting point of the primordial act of faith. The Church puts herself always and only at the "service of conscience," helping it to avoid being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine proposed by human deceit (cf. Eph 4:14), and helping it not to swerve from the truth about the good of man, but rather, especially in more difficult questions, to attain the truth with certainty and to abide in it.
- d. Conscience in a relativistic worldview is but a euphemistic way of saying that there is no such thing as an actual conscience, conscience understood as a "co-knowing" with the truth. Each person determines his own standards.
- e. In summary: Conscience is rooted in truth, and there is a truth about man, law and what is good and evil. **Truth is prior to conscience.** Whenever truth is ignored or not known, error in practical judgment comes.

2. Confusion between freedom and the law

- a. VS 54: The way in which one conceives the relationship between freedom and law is thus intimately bound up with one's understanding of the moral conscience. Here the cultural tendencies ... in which freedom and law are set in opposition to each another and kept apart, and freedom is exalted almost to the point of idolatry--lead to a "'creative' understanding of moral conscience,
- b. VS 55: Some even hold that this process of maturing is inhibited by the excessively categorical position adopted by the Church's Magisterium in many moral questions; for them, the Church's interventions are the cause of unnecessary "conflicts of conscience."
- c. When men advocate the rights of conscience, they often don't mean the rights of the Creator, he says, but of their judgment and humor without thought of God.
- d. Many Catholics disregard the Council's clear teaching that "the supreme rule of life is the divine law itself, the eternal, objective and universal law by which God, out of his wisdom and love, arranges, directs and governs the whole world and the paths of the human community" (DH 3).

3. Situational ethics

- a. VS 55: According to the opinion of some theologians, the function of conscience had been reduced, at least at a certain period in the past, to a simple application of general moral norms to individual cases in the life of the person. But those norms, they continue, cannot be expected to foresee and to respect all the individual concrete acts of the person in all their uniqueness and particularity. While such norms might somehow be useful for a correct "assessment" of the situation, they cannot replace the individual personal decision on how to act in particular cases. The critique already mentioned of the traditional understanding of human nature and of its importance for the moral life has even led certain authors to state that these norms are not so much a binding objective criterion for judgments of conscience, but a "general perspective" which helps man tentatively to put order into his personal and social life. ... In their desire to emphasize the "creative" character of conscience, certain authors no longer call its actions "judgments" but "decisions": only by making these decisions "autonomously" would man be able to attain moral maturity.
 - i. VS 61. Consequently "in the practical judgment of conscience," which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, "the link between freedom and truth is made manifest." Precisely for this reason conscience expresses itself in acts of "judgment" which reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary "decisions". The maturity and responsibility of these judgments--and, when all is said and done, of the individual who is their subject--are not measured by the liberation of the conscience from objective truth, in favour of an alleged autonomy in personal decisions, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one's actions.
- b. VS 56: By taking account of circumstances and the situation, [it] could legitimately be the basis of certain "exceptions to the general rule" and thus permit one to do in practice and in good conscience what is qualified as intrinsically evil by the moral law. A separation, or even an opposition, is thus established in some cases between the teaching of the precept, which is valid in general, and the norm of the individual conscience, which would in fact make the final decision about what is good and what is evil. On this basis, an attempt is made to legitimize so-called "pastoral" solutions contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium, and to justify a "creative" hermeneutic according to which the moral conscience is in no way obliged, in every case, by a particular negative precept.

4. Conscience as opinion

- a. Many just think conscience is their own opinion, or gut feeling, about the way things ought to be.
 - i. Computer file sharing in college.
 - ii. No real listening to God.

5. Conscience as feelings or superego

- a. Conscience is not feelings of moral approval or disapproval, like the Freudian superego, the continuation of the moral valuations of parents in your actions of whether they'd approve of not. Understood in this sense, it will frequently condemn what is not wrong or approve what is not right. Psychological conscience cannot of itself provide a person with moral guidance.
- b. We don't feel the conscience; it is a judgment of reason, though sometimes concomitant subordinate emotions will play a secondary role.
- c. Msgr. Livio Melina²: There is an emotional aspect which supports reason, but conscience itself is a rational act. The feelings associated are secondary, though they support conscience. The extent and depth of the feelings depend upon somatic constitution. The feelings do not belong to the essence of the conscience. When we follow our conscience, we follow the judgment of reason and not our emotions. We can do the right thing even though we feel no satisfaction or even

² Class notes taken by me, 1999, Moral Theology, John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family

sadness. The neurotic person may feel guilty even though the reason says that they haven't done anything wrong.

- d. Fr. Wojciech Giertych, OP: There is another distinction between conscience and the superego. Conscience is basically the act of reason, distinguished from the concomitant feelings which support the judgment of conscience. In the neurotic, there are emotions which interfere in this process whereby the emotions and the judgment of the conscience are not completely in conformity. People have to be taught to follow the judgment of conscience and not their feelings. The force causing the feeling of guilt is the superego, although Freud said it was a fusion of social and moral factors, as well as their education. We should define superego as uniquely the quasi-habit of the interior senses — memory and the utility judgment — which causes a certain misguiding in the emotions. It is a quasi-habit because it really doesn't completely involve the reason. Animals can have guilty feelings. Animals have emotions, and by playing on the emotions they can be trained; but this is not conscience. The conscience when it guides it invites to the creation of value through love, whereas the superego orders an act to gain appraisal, or out of fear that love will be taken away. Conscience has an extroverted attitude, toward the value; the superego is introverted, the center of attention is how one feels. Conscience is sensitive to value and capable of risk; the superego is static and helpless in new situations. Conscience is based on values independently of the status of authority; superego is heteronomous, seeking its basis on law. Superego looks at individual cases; conscience, the general. The superego looks to the past it wants to redeem; conscience to the future. Conscience wants to heal the attitude for the future; superego wants to be punished and thereby merit. Superego experiences a speedy transfer to the deep feeling of guilt to the feeling of value by confessing before authority. Conscience produces a feeling of guilt regardless of whether the authority has noticed; superego is more dependent on the weight of authority (what would the superior say?). A sound moral education should grant the ability to discern the rational judgment of the conscience and not the feelings, justifying the feelings only when in accord with reason. Conscience's judgments should be recognized as in accord with the moral guidance expressed in the divine law, although all the implications of the moral law don't have to be known. If we undertake an effort, we should be able to perceive the good, although with some error and in a cloud.

6. Ignorance is bliss

- a. There was a recent article in First Things Magazine about whether Hitler had a conscience.
- b. Ratzinger presented a similar argument from some colleagues: "The SS people would be justified and we should seek them in heaven since they carried out all their atrocities with fanatic conviction and complete certainty of conscience. Another responded with utmost assurance that of course this was indeed the case. There is no doubting the fact that Hitler and his accomplices, who were deeply convinced of their cause, could not have acted otherwise. Therefore, the objective terribleness of their deeds notwithstanding, they acted morally, subjectively speaking. Since they followed their albeit mistaken consciences, one would have to recognize their conduct as moral and, as a result, should not doubt their eternal salvation. Since that conversation I knew with complete certainty that something was wrong with the theory of the justifying power of the subjective conscience."

7. Silence of conscience in modern world

- a. People aren't thinking about it. Their conscience is deadened. People don't really educate it.

8. With regard to these confusions, and before we shift specifically to the formation of conscience, Cardinal Newman's thoughts would provide a healthy review and a healthy critique. In 1991, Cardinal Ratzinger said that Newman's "life and work could be designated a single great commentary on the question of conscience."

- a. It came through experience.
- b. His conversion was a following of the truth, saying shortly beforehand, "No one could have a more unfavorable view than I of the present state of the Roman Catholics."

- c. His letter to the Duke of Norfolk in 1875 has one of the greatest treatises on conscience that exist in the Christian tradition.
- d. Catholics consider [conscience] to be the internal witness of both the existence and the law of God. ... Though it may be called, and is, a law of the mind, they would not grant that it was nothing more; I mean, that it was not a dictate, nor conveyed the notion of responsibility, of duty, of a threat and a promise, with a vividness which discriminated it from all other constituents of our nature;
- e. Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, and, even though the eternal priesthood throughout the Church could cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have a sway.
- f. Let us see what is the notion of conscience in this day in the popular mind. There, no more than in the intellectual world, does "conscience" retain the old, true, Catholic meaning of the word. There too the idea, the presence of a Moral Governor is far away from the use of it, frequent and emphatic as that use of it is. When men advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the Creator, nor the duty to Him, in thought and deed, of the creature; but the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting, according to their judgment or their humour, without any thought of God at all. They do not even pretend to go by any moral rule, but they demand, what they think is an Englishman's prerogative, for each to be his own master in all things, and to profess what he pleases, asking no one's leave, and accounting priest or preacher, speaker or writer, unutterably impertinent, who dares to say a word against his going to perdition, if he like it, in his own way. Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. It becomes a license to take up any or no religion, to take up this or that and let it go again, to go to church, to go to chapel, to boast of being above all religions and to be an impartial critic of each of them. Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this century it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will.
- g. I have to say again, lest I should be misunderstood, that when I speak of Conscience, I mean conscience truly so called. When it has the right of opposing the supreme, though not infallible Authority of the Pope, it must be something more than that miserable counterfeit which, as I have said above, now goes by the name. If in a particular case it is to be taken as a sacred and sovereign monitor, its dictate, in order to prevail against the voice of the Pope, must follow upon serious thought, prayer, and all available means of arriving at a right judgment on the matter in question. And further, obedience to the Pope is what is called "in possession;" that is, the *onus probandi* of establishing a case against him lies, as in all cases of exception, on the side of conscience. Unless a man is able to say to himself, as in the Presence of God, that he must not, and dare not, act upon the Papal injunction, he is bound to obey it, and would commit a great sin in disobeying it. *Primâ facie* it is his bounden duty, even from a sentiment of loyalty, to believe the Pope right and to act accordingly. He must vanquish that mean, ungenerous, selfish, vulgar spirit of his nature, which, at the very first rumor of a command, places itself in opposition to the Superior who gives it, asks itself whether he is not exceeding his right, and rejoices, in a moral and practical matter to commence with skepticism. He must have no willful determination to exercise a right of thinking, saying, doing just what he pleases, the question of truth and falsehood, right and wrong, the duty if possible of obedience, the love of speaking as his Head speaks, and of standing in all cases on his Head's side, being simply discarded. If this necessary rule were observed, collisions between the Pope's authority and the authority of conscience

would be very rare. On the other hand, in the fact that, after all, in extraordinary cases, the conscience of each individual is free, we have a safeguard and security, were security necessary (which is a most gratuitous supposition), that no Pope ever will be able, as the objection supposes, to create a false conscience for his own ends.

- h. Newman's, *Idea of a University*, "Ecclesiastical authority, not argument, is the supreme rule and appropriate guide for Catholics in matters of religion."

Formation of Conscience

1. Jesus' words on the importance of the formation of conscience
 - a. VS 64. The words of Jesus — The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Mt 6:22-23) — also represent a call to "form our conscience," to make it the object of a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good. In the same vein, Saint Paul exhorts us not to be conformed to the mentality of this world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our mind (cf. Rom 12:2). It is the "heart" converted to the Lord and to the love of what is good which is really the source of "true" judgments of conscience. Indeed, in order to "prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2), knowledge of God's law in general is certainly necessary, but it is not sufficient: what is essential is a sort of "'connaturality' between man and the true good." [110] Such a connaturality is rooted in and develops through the virtuous attitudes of the individual himself: prudence and the other cardinal virtues, and even before these the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. This is the meaning of Jesus' saying: "He who does what is true comes to the light" (Jn 3:21).
2. Ratzinger on proper formation
 - a. Ratzinger: Whether something is recognized or not depends too on the will, which can block the way to recognition or lead to it. It is dependent... on an already formed moral character that can either continue to deform or be further purified. On this level, the level of judgment, it can be said that even the erroneous conscience binds. ... No one may act against his convictions, as St. Paul had already said (Rom 14:23). But the fact that the conviction a person has come to certainly binds in the moment of acting, does not signify a canonization of subjectivity. It is never wrong to follow the convictions one has arrived at — in fact one must do so. But it can very well be wrong to have come to such askew convictions in the first place by having stifled the protest of the anamnesis of being. The guilt lies then in a different place, much deeper — not in the present act, not in the present judgment of conscience, but in the neglect of my being which made me deaf to the internal promptings of truth. For this reason, criminals of conviction like Hitler and Stalin are guilty. These crass examples should not serve to put us at ease but should rouse us to take seriously the earnestness of the plea: Free me from my unknown guilt" (Ps 19:13).
3. Forming one's conscience involves bringing "subjective" into alignment with the "objective." These are some of the ways:
 - a. Grasping the implications of the basic principles of morality
 - b. Grasping the morally significant features of the situation
 - c. Applying these norms to the situation to form reasonable judgments of conscience
 - d. Recognition of the precedence of truth vis-à-vis the judgment of conscience
 - e. The interiority of the call of morality
 - f. The predisposition in a subject to virtuous attitudes
 - g. The docility, humility and openness to whomever might be our teacher on the road to morality
 - h. The preparation for an encounter with truth in communion with those who sincerely seek it.
4. Learning from how conscience is deformed

- a. CCC 1792 Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct.
 - b. We see here several indications for the proper formation:
 - i. Good formation in early years
 - ii. Knowledge of Christ and his Gospel
 - iii. Learning from good example of others, Christ and the saints, friends
 - iv. Virtues to master one's passions
 - v. Proper understanding of the autonomy of conscience
 - vi. Acceptance of the Church's teaching
 - vii. Continual conversion
 - viii. Charity
5. Education of conscience in general
- a. We're not born knowing right or wrong in all its detail, even though the voice of God is like an aboriginal vicar. We educate our conscience just like any other type of learning, through parents, teachers, personal experience, theoretical reflection, etc.
 - b. CCC 1783 Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.
 - c. CCC 1784 The education of the conscience is a lifelong task. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart.
6. Interiority and silence
- a. CCC 1779 It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of interiority is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection.
7. Prayer
- a. If we're seeking to hear the Lord's voice, we need to try to listen to it in prayer.
 - b. Specifically prayer to the Holy Spirit, his gifts (counsel, prudence, wisdom, reverence, fear of the Lord)
8. Learning and inhering to the Word of God
- a. CCC 1785 In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path,[54] we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord's Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church
9. Not to be conformed to the world
- a. VS 62. Certainly, in order to have a "good conscience" (1 Tim 1:5), man must seek the truth and must make judgments in accordance with that same truth. As the Apostle Paul says, the conscience must be "confirmed by the Holy Spirit" (cf. Rom 9:1); it must be "clear" (2 Tim 1:3); it must not "practice cunning and tamper with God's word", but "openly state the truth" (cf. 2 Cor 4:2). On the other hand, the Apostle also warns Christians: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2).
 - b. Polling does this. Peer pressure affects it. "85% of people think something is wrong" has a strong weight today.

10. Being conformed to the Truth

- a. Conscience means *cum-scientia*, to know together with the truth.
- b. VS 63. It is always from the truth that the dignity of conscience derives. In the case of the correct conscience, it is a question of the "objective truth" received by man; in the case of the erroneous conscience, it is a question of what man, mistakenly, "subjectively" considers to be true. It is never acceptable to confuse a "subjective" error about moral good with the "objective" truth rationally proposed to man in virtue of his end, or to make the moral value of an act performed with a true and correct conscience equivalent to the moral value of an act performed by following the judgment of an erroneous conscience.[108] It is possible that the evil done as the result of invincible ignorance or a non-culpable error of judgment may not be imputable to the agent; but even in this case it does not cease to be an evil, a disorder in relation to the truth about the good. Furthermore, a good act which is not recognized as such does not contribute to the moral growth of the person who performs it; it does not perfect him and it does not help to dispose him for the supreme good. Thus, before feeling easily justified in the name of our conscience, we should reflect on the words of the Psalm: "Who can discern his errors? Clear me from hidden faults" (Ps 19:12). There are faults which we fail to see but which nevertheless remain faults, because we have refused to walk towards the light (cf. Jn 9:39-41).
- c. Truth of the faith
- d. Living Example of Christ
 - i. He is the truth incarnate who sets us free. He came to give witness to the truth
 - ii. He is the exemplar. Love one another as I have loved you. I have done this as an example, so that just as I have done this for you, you may do so for each other.
- e. Lives of the Saints
 - i. St. Edith Stein, reading the life of St. Teresa, this is the truth.
- f. VS 64. Christians have a great help for the formation of conscience "in the Church and her Magisterium." As the Council affirms: "In forming their consciences the Christian faithful must give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. Her charge is to announce and teach authentically that truth which is Christ, and at the same time with her authority to declare and confirm the principles of the moral order which derive from human nature itself".[111]

11. Choosing in accord with conscience

- a. CCC 1786 Faced with a moral choice, conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them.
- b. CCC 1787 Man is sometimes confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult. But he must always seriously seek what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in divine law.
- c. CCC 1788 To this purpose, man strives to interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gifts.
- d. CCC 1789 Some rules apply in every case:
 - i. One may never do evil so that good may result from it;
 - ii. The Golden Rule: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them."[56]
 - iii. Charity always proceeds by way of respect for one's neighbor and his conscience: "Thus sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience ... you sin against Christ." Therefore "it is right not to ... do anything that makes your brother stumble."
- e. Experience helps.

12. Developing the virtues

- a. True conscience always presents a challenge, like the steep and narrow way of the Gospel that stands in stark contrast to the broad and easy way that leads to eternal sorrow. True conscience gives those who follow it a peace and joy that no external thing can trouble.
- b. Fr. Wojciech Giertych, OP: Some people manage to perceive the truth, but fail to put it into practice due to lack of virtues. Their conscience can issue true statements, but they fail to act in a moral way. In time, if this is not overcome, they will begin to question the standards conscience perceives. We are a composite whole and if we lack perseverance, in time we back out from truth. We can ask ourselves to what extent the prevalent subjectivity in culture is a result of the lack of moral vigor and the lack of sound philosophy. The lack of moral strength can be the result of the lack of a father figure in education. There may be the lack of a personal relationship with God which permits the overcoming of difficulties when we've failed, and by which we can let him pick us up and return to him and the moral standards. The lack may be caused by the failure to express the assertive emotions. In such cases, the judgment of conscience may be true, but very little will flow out of it. The divine image is manifested in the charity of the Christian and perfected by his free choice in accord with the truth we perceive.
- c. Martyrdom
 - i. The martyrdom of saints shows that following conscience is not necessarily easy, like the martyrdom of Saint Thomas More. He followed his conscience to the end.
 - ii. Ratzinger: Newman shows that "a man of conscience is one who never acquires tolerance, well-being, success, public standing and approval on the part of prevailing opinion at the expense of truth. In this regard Newman is related to Britain's other great witness of conscience, Thomas More, for whom conscience was not at all an expression of subjective stubbornness or obstinate heroism. He numbered himself, in fact, among those fainthearted martyrs who only after faltering and much questioning succeed in mustering up obedience to conscience, mustering up obedience to the truth that must stand higher than any human tribunal or any type of personal taste. Thus two standards become apparent for ascertaining the presence of a real voice of conscience. First, conscience is not identical to personal wishes and taste. Secondly, conscience cannot be reduced to social advantage, group consensus or the demands of political and social power."

13. Examining one's Conscience

- a. We must review our decisions in the light of God and speak to him about decisions we're confronting.
- b. Crisis of conscience comes from lack of an examination. Many of us are responding to our impulses. Others rationally look at decisions they face. But so many don't discuss it with God.
- c. Not just a review of sinful actions, but correspondence to grace. Ends with:
 - i. Thank you
 - ii. Sorry
 - iii. Help me more!
- d. Cormac Burke, *Conscience and Freedom*, 25:
 - i. "Conscience is a precious but delicate guide. Its voice is easily distorted or obscured. To dictate to conscience is to silence and, eventually, to destroy it. Conscience must be listened to and listened to sensitively. It needs to be interrogated, even to be cross-examined. And only those who habitually interrogate their conscience and are ready to pay heed even to its awkward answers, will not cheat their conscience or be cheated by it."
- e. RP 31³: An indispensable condition is the rectitude and clarity of the penitent's conscience. People cannot come to true and genuine repentance until they realize that sin is contrary to the

³ POST-SYNODAL APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION, RECONCILIATION AND PENANCE, JP11

ethical norm written in their inmost being; until they admit that they have had a personal and responsible experience of this contrast; until they say not only that "sin exists" but also "I have sinned"; until they admit that sin has introduced a division into their consciences, which then pervades their whole being and separates them from God and from their brothers and sisters. The sacramental sign of this clarity of conscience is the act traditionally called the examination of conscience, an act that must never be one of anxious psychological introspection but a sincere and calm comparison with the interior moral law, with the evangelical norms proposed by the Church, with Jesus Christ himself who is our Teacher and Model of life, and with the heavenly Father, who calls us to goodness and perfection.

14. Studying of cases of conscience
 - a. Fundamental way of training confessors for many years.
 - b. Applicable to everyone
15. Going to Confession
 - a. See our need for God's grace by seeing clearly how we haven't corresponded.
 - b. Get concrete advice, when the whole Church exists for you.
16. Receiving Spiritual direction
 - a. Speak about our big decisions in dialogue with someone hopefully more advanced in the Christian life.
 - b. Msgr. Livio Melina: St. Ignatius of Loyola has a rule for the discernment of spirits, to understand if the spirit that inspires me and leads me to judgment and actions is good, mine, or bad. We have to discern what the spirit is. The 13th rule is formulated this way: to judge and capture the truth in every point, we have to be disposed to say that white is black and black is white if the Holy Roman Catholic Church, the Spouse of Christ and my mother, says it. This Church has the same author as the author of the Ten Commandments. He's not denying the conscience. We have to be disposed to let go of our own experiences. The HS is given to the Church. Ignatius attributes to the Church two titles above all, Spouse of Christ and Mother. It generates us and has a paschal character. Our Christian subjectivity has to be disposed to verify our own convictions in the ecclesial context. We're not talking about denying reason, but verifying it ecclesially. This is a rule given to verify the conscience.
17. Seeking communion
 - a. Domestic Church and Church
 - b. Msgr. Livio Melina: Conscience implies the reference to communion. *Cum-scire*, to know together. The true that is within conscience is a universal knowledge. It strikes everyone within. We find this in GS 16. The formation of the conscience, and the path of the conscience to the truth, demands a communion with other persons. It demands a docility. We have to be teachable by the truth. These two characteristics, open to the truth and to communion, mean that the conscience isn't autonomous or self-sufficient, but is in relation with others.
 - c. To form consciences, it's not enough just to impart info, but form communities that live the virtues, family, school, parish, government, media, entertainment.
18. Confronting of silence of conscience
 - a. Ratzinger about forming conscience of young: "It was my impression that if you begin to explain it with the contrast to the world, they begin to understand the silence, a collective silence of conscience which is the destruction of man." Marxist kids might not realize it in communism, but they did in the history of Hitler, which led to the destruction of men.
19. Learning from Jesus' method
 - a. Again, it's not enough just to impart info, but also to train freedom and train the conscience.
 - b. Jesus formed conscience by parables, illustrating principles. He also gave clear teaching. He'd propose questions. "Which of the men proved neighbor?" "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?" "Why do you call me good?" he wanted to develop their capacity to listen to the voice of conscience, even though he knew the answers. He wanted to form their freedom.

Conclusion and Questions

1. I'd like to return to something I said at the beginning to wrap up this conversation. It is one case study of many that we could have, but it's something that comes up all the time in our culture, even within the Church.
2. How would you respond to the relative of the pro-abortion politician who said he was merely following freedom of conscience, being personally opposed but publicly in favor of abortion. Is that possible?
3. For whatever it's worth, here's what I replied:
 - a. Sir, you faulted me for not raising the subject of freedom of conscience. I'm presuming that by this you were implying that [this politician] would have been following his conscience in supporting a woman's supposed right to end the life of her child in the womb. By his own admission that he was "personally opposed" to abortion, however — not to mention the words he wrote in a letter to a constituent (quoted in the first editorial), which, even if written by a staffer, I would presume would reflect his thoughts on the matter at the time — he seems to have been giving a clear indication that in conscience he knew abortion was wrong, not just for him but objectively; with regard to his public duties, he had a duty to follow that judgment in conscience. With regard to the idea that women should have the right to follow an erroneous conscience and kill their babies in the womb, he had the moral obligation to oppose that erroneous judgment in conscience, in the same way that he would have opposed child molesters' erroneous judgments that sex with kids is fine. Conscience is always bound to the truth and is not a freedom from the truth. It's certainly not a "get out of mortal sin free card," which is the way sometimes people treat it today. St. Paul points to this in his first letter to the Corinthians, when he writes, "My conscience does not reproach me at all, but that does not prove that I am acquitted: the Lord alone is my judge" (1 Cor 4:4). A "clean conscience," in other words, is not enough. We'll be judged not merely on following our conscience but on how we've attuned our conscience to the voice of God speaking through the Church, through Sacred Scripture, and through prayer (see the *Catechism*, 1791). The Church has been absolutely clear and totally unambiguous not only about the evil of abortion but also about the duties of Catholic legislators with respect to the evil of abortion; this politician, like all Catholics, was bound to form his conscience according to those truths.
4. The measure of our conscience is the measure of our dignity and character. The better formed it is, the more we with virtues follow it, the better we will be.

For Further Reading

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 1776-1802.
2. Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 1993, paragraphs 32, 54-64.
3. *Catholic Conscience, Foundation and Formation*, The Pope John Center (presently the National Catholic Bioethics Center) Proceedings of the Tenth Bishops' Workshop, Dallas, Texas, 1991.
4. Msgr. Livio Melina, *Moral Theology*, Transcribed class notes by Fr. Roger J. Landry at the John Paul II Institute for the Study of Marriage and Family, Pontifical Lateran University, 1999, pp. 17-24.
5. Fr. Wojciech Giertych, OP, *Fundamental Moral Theology*, Transcribed class notes by Fr. Roger J. Landry at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas, 1995, pp. 58-61
6. *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II, paragraph 16
7. Fr. Aurelio Fernandez and Fr. James Socias, *Our Moral Life in Christ: A Basic Course in Moral Theology*, Midwest Theology Forum, 1997, pp. 67-84.
8. Fr. Romanus Cessario, OP, *Introduction to Moral Theology*, CUA Press, 2001, pp. 129-133, 137-38, 173, 189.
9. *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology: Studies by Ten Outstanding Scholars*, Scepter Publishers, 1999, pp. 43-46, 86-87, 135-137.
10. Fr. Servais Pinckaers, OP, *Morality: The Catholic View*, St. Augustine's Press, 2001, pp. 52-68.

11. Msgr. Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, CUA Press, 2001, pp. 178-191.
12. William E. May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology, Second Edition*, Our Sunday Visitor, 2003, pp. 58-69.